Healing for Your Bruises

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So Many Christians today are struggling with the problem of the hurts and wounds of the soul which come through "stumbling" and "offenses".

Just what causes people to stumble?
What are the consequences and what is the solution?
How is our relationship to Christ affected?
What would Jesus have us do?

What is going to be unfolded in this article is one of the most needed areas of understanding for your Christian life that you will ever come into, and will help immensely in your outlook on life if you will grasp its truth and apply it in your daily walk with God. It will also help you to enter into the reality of that which is expressed by the Psalmist:
"*Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing causes them to stumble." (Literally: they have no stumbling block) King James Version: "Nothing shall OFFEND them*." ***Psalm 119:165***

Consider this! If you were walking down a path and stumbled over a rock, falling and getting physically hurt, how much good would it do for you to have a "bitter and blaming" spirit toward that rock from that day on? Or to have a desire to somehow get even, or get back at the rock in order to get some kind of revenge. Would such an attitude bring healing to your body or help you in any way? You know the answer! Yet, can we not see the parallel between that and the wounds of the soul? So many go through life with a "bitter and blaming" spirit against some person or circumstance (or even God) because of a severe hurt (or hurts) received at some time (or different times). The result is that their entire outlook on life (their attitudes, motivations, reactions, toward everything) is colored by such poison in their soul. Their spiritual life is greatly affected and hindered. Such was the case in the life of Simon of Samaria. He was converted under the preaching of Phillip (***Acts 8:5-23***).
Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

Later when Peter and John came he saw the miraculous manifestation of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and wanted to purchase such power with money.
Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

Peter perceived that such wrong motivation was the result of twisted concepts, which no doubt manifested and surfaced because of past "wounds", for he said to Simon, **"For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."**
Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin." Acts 8:5-23 NIV

Because of the fall of man, every person is born with a sin-nature which eventually manifests itself in self-will and disobedience, but in the actual developing experience of a person, it is not until the accumulative "wounds" of experience begin to fester and poison the soul, that there develops the "bondage of sin" through "bitterness". At an early age a child begins to

manifest the innate tendency to self-will and disobedience, but that child is not yet in bondage to the poison of hate, envy, resentment, bitterness, greed, distrust, futility, defeat, depression etc. These develop out of the "wounds" of experience through "stumbling".

People tend to REACT in given situations because of the "residue of poisonous sin" accumulated from hurtful experiences of the past. People also tend to try to reach out and COMPENSATE in some self seeking way, as did Simon. From these things there are deliverance and healing for the wounds in the soul. God does not Condemn us for stumbling and getting hurt, but He does warn us not to fail to RESPOND to HIS HEALING GRACE lest there be poisoning and bitterness set in.

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. Heb.12:14-15 (NIV)

You can blame and excuse all you want, but the result is simply more damage to your inner emotional being, more reaping in grief of the wrong kind of seed sown, and more stifling suppression and hindrance to your spiritual life. When that happens, you are the loser. So don't hang onto your bruises and nurse them in your pride and self-pity. Yield them to the Lord and ask for His complete healing and deliverance. Hold nothing against anyone, but forgive, as you have been forgiven by the Lord. What you cannot do in yourself, He will give you the GRACE to do.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Eph. 4:30-32 NIV

Offended in Christ?

A most remarkable statement was made by Jesus in Mt. 11:6 "Blessed is the man who does not fall away (be offended) on account of me." Offended in Christ? How could this be? What is there in such a perfect and lovely one that anyone could be offended about? We will come to a consideration of this scripture later, but notice Jesus' words to His disciples on the night of His betrayal: "This very night you will all fall away (be offended) on account of me." (Mt. 26:31). ALL of His close followers, who had walked with Him for many months, and who had shared His very life and ministry offended because of Him? Surely not! Peter thought the same thing when he heard Jesus say this "Peter replied, Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." (Mt. 26:33). How is that for self-confidence? Peter thought he knew better than Jesus, but to his own grief he was to find out differently. Even the great apostle Paul declares in Acts 24:16 "So I strive always to keep my conscience clear (free from offence) before God and man" Paul, having to be careful not to be offended at God? How amazing! Surely we think that I would never be offended in Jesus; for He is my Savior and I love Him! But wait! Don't jump to conclusions, and don't fail to read all of this Article.

Understanding the Word

The English work "offence" is a translation of the Hebrew work *Mikshol*, and the Greek word *Skandalon*; both meaning "a stumbling, a stumbling block", or in the verb form "to offend" means "to cause to stumble or fall". In other words, to be offended, or to take offence, means that one stumbles or falls over something. In the natural or physical realm, what happens when one stumbles over something in his or her pathway? Usually the person gets hurt, and some kind of a bruise (or worse wound) is the result. If that wound is not taken care of so that it heals properly, it can get infection in it, blood poisoning can result, and the whole body can be endangered. In order for the body to function normally again, the bruise or wound must be healed, and God has provided the necessary chemistry in the physical body for that healing, providing the proper care is taken.

Jesus' Provision

God's chemistry in the physical body (or outer man) for the healing of bruises caused by stumbling, is only a natural type or picture of God's provision through the redemption of Christ for the healing of the "inner man" of the soul of the "hurts" and "bruises" of life. When Jesus arose to speak in the synagogue of Nazareth after returning to Galilee in the power of the Spirit (Lk. 4:14), He said "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he hath anointed me . . . to set at liberty them that are bruised" (Lk. 4:18). Young's literal translation says "To send away the bruised with deliverance." When you are bruised or hurt in the physical body, it brings a certain amount of "bondage" because you are not able to function normally. Even so is it in the "inner man". The "hurts" we receive hinder our normal functioning. We "limp along" in varying degrees to "bondage", which keeps us from normal, healthy relationships with God and with others. But Isaiah the prophet declares, "He (Christ) was bruised for our iniquities . . . It pleased the Lord to bruise him . . . surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows" (Isa. 53:4-5, 10). He bore our bruises and hurts; and His redemption provides for the healing of the "inner man" of the soul that we might be "set at liberty" (with rejoicing).

The Good Samaritan

In the parable recorded in Luke 10:30-37, we see a certain Samaritan stopping to minister to the wounds of the man who had been attacked by thieves. The man was traveling down from Jerusalem, the city of God, to Jericho, the "moon-city" of man's false and distorted lights (under the power of Satan). Thus this man pictures all of us who are a part of Adam's fallen race, going down and away from God on the road to destruction (through our own sin and self-will). The "thieves" are the experiences of life which tempt us into sin, rob us, wound and hurt us, and leave us in a dying condition ("the wages of sin is death" Rom. 6:23). The "good Samaritan" who bound up the man's wounds is none other than Jesus Christ, "pouring in oil and wine" (Lk. 10:34); the wine being symbolic of the cleansing and forgiveness through His blood, and the oil picturing the healing and liberating power of the Holy Spirit. He takes us to the "inn" of the church, where He ministers continued healing to our soul through the beautiful "love-chemistry" of the spiritual Body of Christ.

Why do we Stumble?

A child receives many bruises and hurts in the physical body while growing up because of immaturity, carelessness, and lack of good judgment. The physical body is a sensitive organism, and if not taken care of, it will show the marks of immature and careless "knocking around". The inner soul of man is also a very sensitive "organism"; it is easily bruised by the hurts and disappointments of life. Our soul is our inner "mental-emotional" being which receives and retains the impressions of life's experiences. And when these experiences are "rough", as a result of our own immaturity and lack of understanding, or our foolishness and obstinacy, or through the fault of others, then we do not know how to "cope" with them. As a result we "stumble" over things that happen (misjudging circumstances, people, events, and even God), and receive many "wounds" (some very slightly, some very deeply) in our inner mental-emotional being.

Soul-fester

If a physical wound is not treated properly so that it can heal, it can fester and get worse, endangering the whole body. The dictionary definition for "fester" is "to cause to putrefy (rot); To putrefy or rot means to decay or decompose; inflammation is a diseased condition of a part of the body characterized by heat, redness and pain; pus is the putrid effervescence which flows out of a wound. How vividly do these physical characteristics of a wound typify that which can

happen within the soul of any person who is not "healed" of inner bruises. "Festering" can take place within the soul of a person whose inner bruises or wounds remain, and the person becomes embittered, with their personality in a "rotting" or "decaying" condition, with the "inflammation, heat and redness" of hate, jealousy, strife, anger, bickering, resentment, etc., causing inner pain and heartache, and the "pus" of the infection overflowing to others.

Root Problems and Causes

Dealing with the symptoms is not the answer. Many abnormal behavior patterns in children, youth and even adults, as well as their immediate frustrations, anxieties and tensions, can be traced to old "wounds" which have resulted in deep resentments and bitterness. In Heb. 12:15, we read the warning: "See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." Thus, the root problem of many surface symptoms is the infection and festering of bitterness. But the root cause of all such symptoms is the inability to respond meaningfully to God that He might heal and bring deliverance. This is due to the fact that regardless of through whom or what circumstances we have been wounded, the resultant festering and bitterness is directed, at least in part, toward God. Without being fully conscience of it, there can be a blaming of God for the things that happen to us. And without fully understanding why, we find ourselves unable to respond to God as He wants us to. We thus cut ourselves off from the full provision of his Healing and liberating power. The root problems are always related to a breakdown (a "Stumbling") in one or more areas of the basic relationships of life. Family, friends, spouse, employer, other Christians, and God, but the root cause of continued problems, can always be traced back to the inability or failure to relate to the healing Grace provided through the redemption of Christ. The Revised Standard Version translates Heb. 12:15 "see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God", for through that grace Christ sets at liberty them that are bruised.

Building Blocks or Stumbling Stones

It is not God's purpose that we stumble to our own hurt in anything. His purpose is to use every experience of life as a means of building into our lives the qualities that cause us to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29). But this requires that we learn to respond to Him and His grace in the right way in every situation. It is not what happens to us that makes us what we are, but rather our reaction and response to what happens. God has provided the means for our perfecting through the redemptive work of Christ, but the crucible of refining where He works on us is the testing experiences of life. Thus every experience becomes a building block that God can use in His perfecting work in us, or it becomes a stumbling stone which we fall over to our own hurt, and our response in each situation determines which it will be. We need to examine this whole question of the LIFE we are building, for our entire future destiny and placement in God's Kingdom, as well as our usefulness in God's purpose, is dependent upon what is now taking place in our lives. Also, our present blessing, happiness and success are affected by our response to the building or stumbling stones of life. But first, let us take a look at what God did in Christ, as a preparation for His building process in us, that we might perceive the foundation that we building on, as well as the means of building.

Falling or Rising

When Jesus was taken by his parents as a babe to be presented to the Lord in the temple at Jerusalem, a man whose name was Simeon began to prophecy and say: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed." (Luke 2:34 NIV). Jesus was set by the Father as a stone in Israel, which would cause some to fall and others to rise, as a stumbling stone or

stepping stone. This was prophesied in Isa. 28:16 "Behold I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth will not make haste (stumble to his own hurt)." It was also prophesied that the Jews would stumble over this stone (except for a small remnant). "The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread, and he will be a sanctuary, but for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare. Many of them will stumble; they will fall and be broken, they will be snared and captured" (Isa. 8:13-15 NIV).

The Builders

After years of preparation and conditioning under the schoolmaster of the law (Gal. 3:24), the Jewish nation was given the opportunity to become builders in God's Kingdom plan on earth. But they refused to build according to God's plan. The one God placed in their midst as the precious corner stone and sure foundation they rejected. Therefore God rejected them, and transference of the Kingdom inheritance and building privilege was made from the natural seed to the spiritual seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:29). Jesus Himself told of this in a parable recorded in Mt. 21:33-41, Hear another parable: There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, "This is the heir, Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance." So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers? They said to Him, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons." Mt. 21:33-41

His concluding words to the Jews were: "Have you never read in the Scriptures? The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken, but on whomever it falls it will grind him to powder" Since the Jews stumbled and fell on the stone (Christ), they were broken as a nation and scattered, with the Gentiles being given their chance during this age. When Jesus comes again, He will be that stone which will fall in judgment on all who reject him and "grind them to powder" (see Dan. 2:34-35,44).

New Builders

God's plan cannot be frustrated. In fulfillment of Matt. 21:43, the Kingdom of God was taken from the Jews and given to a "new nation" BORN on the day of Pentecost when 3,000 converts responded to the preaching of Peter and were baptized INTO the name of Christ (Acts 2:38-41). The Believing remnant (later joined by many Gentiles) Paul speaks of in Rom. 11:5-7, became the nucleus of a new Kingdom realm of this age which is spiritual and heavenly; the earthly manifestation being held in postponement until Jesus comes again. Jesus has now become the "precious corner stone" of the church which He said He would build (Matt.16:18, Eph. 2:20), and the "sure foundation" of the lives of those who have become "new creatures" in Him (2 Cor. 5:17). But Paul warns in 1 Cor. 3:10 that each one of us is to "take heed how we build" on that foundation. So few Christians realize that what we call "salvation" is only the receiving of Him who is the FOUNDATION upon which we BUILD A LIFE, with the "gold, silver and precious stones" (1 Cor. 3:12), symbolizing the inner qualities and virtues which are to be built into our inner being through His grace that we might be increasingly conformed into His

image and likeness (Rom.8:29).

Co-Builders

In Psalm 127:1 we read, "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it." Here we have two builders mentioned, "the Lord" and "they", but unless "they" submit to the Lord so that He can build their "house" as the "architect" and supervising "contractor", "they" who are simply the "co-laborers", working with Him, are laboring in vain. Paul says In 1 Cor. 3:9, "For we are God's fellow workers (laborers) . . . you are God's building." We see this joint-working together manifested in the life of Jesus when He said, "My Father works and I work." Jesus' primary work in His cooperation with the Father, was the building and perfecting of His LIFE as an "overcomer" (see John 16:33, Rev, 3:21). Jesus said in John 4:34, "My food is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work." As He did the WILL of the Father, submitting to Him in everything, He was learning obedience by the things He suffered or experienced, and thus was being made PERFECT (Heb, 5:8, 2:10), as far as His humanity was concerned, He set the pattern for us. Our lives are also being BUILT into completion or perfection by HIS WORK in us, and by the THINGS WE ARE EXPERIENCING.

Work Out Your Salvation

A scripture many times misunderstood is Phil, 2:12-13: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. FOR it is God which works in you both to will and to do for his good pleasure." Here again we have two "workers", God and ourselves. Salvation is the LIFE of Christ IN us, and on the basis of that salvation, God is WORKING IN us, motivating and empowering us to do His will and fulfill His pleasure. And we have to cooperate in "working out" that salvation by APPLYING His life-principles and truth-ways in every area of our lives, in every relationship and circumstance we experience. Thus as we "work out" what God is "working in", our life-experience and character are BUILT. This emphasizes again that salvation is the beginning of what God purposes, from which we proceed to determine our future destiny and usefulness in God's Kingdom by the maturing and perfecting in our lives. The Greek word translated "work out" means to fully accomplish or to cause to come to completion. The Amplified version says, "carry out to the goal and fully complete your salvation." We begin with the GIFT (of salvation) and work toward the GOAL (of perfection).

The Crux

Now let me emphasize again the crux of the matter, as it relates to both our initial confrontation with Christ, and our continuous facing of Christ and His dealings with us in EVERY EXPERIENCE of life, as either building stones or stumbling stones. God does not purposely cause anyone to stumble, and the Messiah was not SET in Zion for that reason. But God did purpose that His coming into the world would act as a catalyst. A "catalyst" is a substance which produces a chemical change in another substance as it ACTS on it, producing a REACTION in that other substance, and in that reaction certain things are revealed or exposed. Jesus is God's catalyst to bring out and expose what is in man that he might see his NEED. He is also God's cleansing and purging medicine. In the natural, before there can be healing from a wound or sickness in the physical body, there has to be a Cleansing from poisons or that which would cause infection. Even so, the healing of the inner wounds of man's soul caused by sin and its "stumblings", requires the cleansing of the blood of Christ, as well as the continued purging and purifying of the Word of Truth and the Spirit of God. Only through both the negative (cleansing and eliminating) and the positive (healing, imparting, strengthening, building) aspects of Christ's WORK can God's purpose for us be accomplished. Through Christ's coming into the world, God has ACTED (in providing the only solution to man's need), and now man REACTS in different

ways, exposing what is in him, and determining whether the STONE God has placed in his path will become a stepping and building stone, or a stumbling stone and possible stone of destruction.

Wrong Responses

I want to now set before you from the scriptures the various ways in which we can stumble (take offense) and the reasons, Basically, a "stumbling' in any situation is a WRONG RESPONSE to persons or circumstances. Human beings can be "conditioned" to respond in certain ways, and this is what Satan seeks to bring about through his control of the world and its systems, as well as through the influence he exerts on the mental-emotional being of man through his "fiery darts" of thoughts and impressions (Eph. 6:I6). The longer he can keep any person from learning how, by the grace of God, to respond rightly in every situation, the more he is able to instill wrong responses, with the wounds and hurts and offenses becoming more deep-seated all the time, and with the consequent resentments, bitterness, and hate, bringing the person into deeper bondage to his power, and making it more difficult for the person to respond to the grace of God to receive deliverance and healing. This is why the older people become, the less likely it's that they will become Christians, if they continue to refuse to respond. Statistics show that most Christians accepted Christ early in life, before deep-seated patterns of wrong responses brought them into increasing bondage. But no situation is hopeless, for the greater the stumbling and hurt, the greater is His grace to "set at liberty them that are bruised" (Lk, 4:18). We Christians have not stumbled over Christ as Savior, but most of us have stumbled over Him in MANY OTHER OF HIS RELATIONSHIPS TO US, and in MANY AREAS OF HIS DEALINGS WITH US THROUGH HIS WORD AND IN THE EXPERIENCES OF LIFE, We have done this through WRONG RESPONSES, and thus "stumbling", and with these I want to deal.

Lack of Understanding

This is the first and basic reason why we stumble, God has called us "out of darkness into his marvelous LIGHT" (1 Pet. 2:9), But we have to LEARN to "WALK as children of the light" (Eph. 5:8), and this isn't always easy. Notice Jesus' words in John 11:9-10: "If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." Light from God to us is in the form of TRUTH and UNDERSTANDING. If we understand, if we SEE what God wants us to see, so that we PERCEIVE the purpose of His workings and His ways, then we will not stumble. And to the degree that we lack understanding, walking in a measure of darkness and being UNWILLING to let His light ILLUMINE US, we are prone to stumble and take offense, getting hurt in many ways. God wants us to GROW in GRACE, learning how to appropriate and respond to His provision and purpose in every situation, and in KNOWLEDGE and understanding (2 Pet. 3:18). We read in Psalm 119:105, "Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path." There are many things to stumble over on the PATHWAY OF LIFE if we do not have light (understanding), and only the Word of God, diligently studied and applied, can provide that which will keep our "feet from falling" (see Psalm 56:13, 116: 8).

Unbelief

In Heb. 12:1, the writer admonishes Christians to "lay aside every weight, and THE SIN which so easily ensnares us (causing us to stumble)." As we read the book of Hebrews, it is quite clear that the sin referred to is UNBELIEF. The Israelites failed to enter into all the promised inheritance God had for them because of unbelief (Heb.3:19). The warning is given to Christians: "Since A PROMISE remains of entering HIS REST, let us fear, lest any of you seem to have come short of it . . . BEWARE, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief." (Heb.4:1,

3:12). Peter tells us that the Jews "stumble being disobedient TO THE WORD" (1 Pet. 2:8). A part of their trouble was that they were blinded by their traditions (Matt. 7:6-13). But the same is true of Christians. Our sectarian Christianity has created a situation where we are conditioned to believe the emphasis of our particular denomination or group, and to disbelieve or ignore the teachings of the word. Not only is the Spirit of unbelief fostered in our midst, but the resultant disobedience to "ALL the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), through ignorance, neglect or willful rejection, causes us to "LIMIT the Holy One of Israel" (Ps. 78:41) as the Israelites did. Unbelief LIMITS what God can do in our lives, and can result in the more serious matter of actual disobedience and resistance of God's purpose through self-will.

Traditions

An example of the Jews being OFFENDED at the truth which Jesus taught, and stumbling through unbelief, is found in Mt. 15:1-14. I won't go into a discussion of the particular issues which He was dealing with, for I simply want to illustrate a point, He asked the question, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?" Then He proceeded to tell them how they were violating a specific commandment by their man-made interpretation, concluding with the charge, "in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." The disciples were rather upset and worried that Jesus would speak so boldly to those He was seeking to influence, probably fearful that Jesus would be in danger of losing HIS large following, But Jesus, unlike so many of our modern pulpiteers, was only interested in PROCLAIMING TRUTH, not in influencing people in order to add numbers to his following. The disciples of Jesus came to Him after His message and questioned the wisdom of His remarks by saying, "Do you know that the Pharisees were OFFENDED, when they heard this saying?" We need to emphasize again that Jesus never said or did anything to deliberately cause people to stumble, but HE DID SET TRUTH IN THEIR PATHWAY TO SEE WHAT THEY WOULD DO WITH IT, and although they were offended or stumbled at what He said, it was in fact their BLINDNESS because of their TRADITIONS that caused them to stumble.

Discipleship

We read in John 8:30 that MANY believed on Jesus. But Jesus was aware that just initial believing on Him was not sufficient to bring such believers into the full freedom-setting power and inheritance of His truth, therefore He said to them: "If ye ABIDE in my WORD, you are my DISCIPLES indeed. And you shall KNOW the TRUTH, and the truth shall make you FREE" (John 8:31-32). Discipleship requires the continuing in His Word, so that He can CONTINUE TO UNFOLD HIS TRUTH to us, To know His truth, and to reap the benefits and blessings thereof, is a CONTINUING QUEST, not something we have arrived at. And if we are so bound by the Spirit of unbelief in anything new or what is contrary to what we have traditionally believed, then we will no doubt take offense and stumble over many things the Lord wants to teach us. WHAT? Do you not know that Jesus said that "every scribe (teacher) which is instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things NEW and old" (Mt. 13:52). We do not throw out the "old" which has been tested and proven (see 1Thess. 5:21), but we need to be open, as the Berean Christians, who "received the word with all readiness, and searched the scriptures daily, to find out whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11), that we might be enriched with "treasures NEW" from His storehouse.

Does This Offend You?

Jesus Himself spoke these words to His disciples when many of them who had followed Him up to a certain point began to "stumble" over His teaching. Jesus was talking about "eating His flesh and drinking His blood" (see John 6:48-59). Then we read in verses 60-61, "Therefore

many of his disciples, when they heard this, said, This is a hard saying; who can understand it?" When Jesus knew in himself that his disciples COMPLAINED about this, he said to them, "Does this OFFEND you?" In vs. 66 we read that "From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked with him no more." In vs. 63, we see that the "flesh" and "blood" that Jesus said we must eat and drink, are His Word and His Spirit. There are deeper truths of the Word of God that the Lord wants us to partake of, until they become "life" in us (1 Cor. 2:6-13), and there are deeper cleansings and purgings that the Lord wants to accomplish in us by the Spirit (working in us through the efficacy of the blood), as well as greater impartations of Spirit-power He wants us to experience as we "drink in" more of his Spirit-provision (John 7:37-39, 1 Cor.12:13, Eph.1:19). But there are many Christians who "murmur" at these things and refuse to go on with the Lord, being satisfied with what they have, and thus "stumble" over what the Lord would bring them into.

Pride

This leads us to the problem of human pride. For at the root of most stumbling through unbelief and disobedience (self-will) is that primary ingredient of man's fallen nature which the scripture calls pride. We read in Prov. 16:18 that "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a FALL," Pride is simply the ADULATION of SELF, wanting to be a law unto oneself, independent, with a feeling of importance, and a desire for acclaim from others. There are DEGREES of pride, of course, and ALL of us have a measure of this problem whether we are willing to admit it or not. The very methods of God's dealings with us from salvation on, are designed to strike at this root problem of our carnal nature, so that "no FLESH should glory in his presence" (1 Cor. 1:29). Pride makes a person inflexible, unyielding, and unteachable, and through it one is deceived into trying to justify SELF in many ways. Especially there is a tendency to maintain one's own worth, works or merit, as a means of gaining favor with God, or acclaim in the sight of men.

God's Righteousness: FOR us and IN us

The Jews stumbled over the preaching of "Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23), because it required them to lay down any merit of their own, and simply cast themselves in repentance and FAITH on the merits of the sinless Son of God. Paul says that Israel "has not attained to the law of righteousness in the sight of God, because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone . . . For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God" (Rom. 9:31-32, 10:3). Christ is made unto us righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30), but that righteousness must not only be IMPUTED to us when we accept Christ by faith, that we might be justified (forgiven) and accepted (Rom.4:5-8, Eph. 1:6); it must also be FULFILLED IN us through the power and working of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:4). This requires a submission and yielding to the Lord in ALL things; not just initial salvation. And if in any area of our lives we resist the INworking of His righteousness through the Spirit, and through pride and self-will enter into disobedience, we are headed for a stumbling and FALL, taking offense at either the Word of truth and righteousness to us, or in God's method of dealing with us through the "reproofs" of life; even blaming God for what is only the consequence of our own waywardness, And our pride can keep us from admitting our folly and yielding to the Lord. It was to Christians that James wrote: "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble, THEREFORE SUBMIT TO GOD (and to His righteousness). Resist the devil, and he will flee from you, humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord and he will lift you up" (read James 4:5-10).

The Goal

In Psalm 119:165 we read: "Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble," God wants us to come to the place where we so LOVE HIS TRUTH, and are so willing to submit to the dealings of HIS WAYS, that we will "take offense" at nothing, not even HIS REPROOFS and CORRECTIONS. Paul says that ALL Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for "doctrine (teaching), for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works (2 Tim.3:16-17). God teaches us through His WORD and through EXPERIENCE. If through unbelief, self-will or pride we stumble at the Word, then He seeks to SPEAK to us through the "reproofs" of life's experiences, through the things that happen to us, the circumstances, events, and the interaction of other people in our lives. These things do not just "happen" they are a part of God's providential dealings with us. Paul declared in Acts 24:16, "This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience WITHOUT OFFENSE toward GOD and MEN." Paul realized the folly of a WRONG RESPONSE in any situation, to any man, or to God, regardless of what might happen to him. Therefore he "exercised (disciplined) himself", for he realized that such a wrong response (stumbling) would result in an "emotional wound" in which resentment, discouragement, bitterness, hate, etc., could begin to fester and take root with poisonous results.

Trials

God does not tempt (James 1:13), but He does TRY or TEST us in many ways for our own good, that He might make manifest the strengths and weaknesses of our lives; showing us that which needs to be dealt with and changed, and using the testing situations to BUILD strength and VIRTUE (character) in us, that His "perfect work" might be accomplished in His own (see James 1:1-4). "I the Lord search the heart, I TEST the mind (secret parts), even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings" (Jer. 17:10). God's pattern is found in His dealings with the Israelites in the wilderness of testing. "And you shall remember that the Lord your God led all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you, and TEST you, to KNOW what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not" (Deut. 8:2). When Israel came to their first real test in the wilderness, after God had shown them wonders in the land of Egypt, delivering them with mighty power, they manifested unbelief, discontent and murmuring, After three days they could find no water until they came to the waters of Marah, which were bitter and not fit to drink, "Marah" means bitterness, Water is a type of the human soul with its desires and emotions, and "Marah" speaks of the BITTERNESSES which can come to the SOUL through WRONG EMOTIONAL RESPONSES in the testings and trials of life.

God's TREE for Healing

God showed Moses a certain tree which he was told to cast into the waters, and through which the waters became sweet, As a result, the record says that "there he (God) made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there He PROVED them." It was also there that God said: "I am the LORD (Jehovah) who HEALS you" (Ex. 15:26). The TREE cast into the waters symbolizes CHRIST CRUCIFIED, for It was through the FINISHED WORK of Christ on Calvary that a "HEALING FOUNTAIN" was opened for sinful and wounded humanity (Zech. l3:1). Physical healing was provided for us in Christ's sacrifice, but many times the manifestation of healing in the physical body is hindered by the lack of healing of the INNER MAN of the SOUL (the mental-emotional being). As Christians we have the provision for physical healing and we rightfully put emphasis on the healing we need in our physical bodies, but SO OFTEN (not always) the physical problem is only an outward symptom of the INNER WOUNDS in mind and emotions which also need to be healed; BITTERNESSES which need to be made SWEET through the miraculous grace of our Christ, as He "pours in the oil and wine" (Lk.10:34) provided through His atoning work.

Paul's Burden

Paul's labors (and spiritual travail) were directed toward the goal of seeing "Christ FORMED" within each Christian, that he might have the privilege of presenting "every man PERFECT (mature) in Christ Jesus" (see Gal. 4:19, Col. 1:28-29). A necessary part of this growth and preparation for the day of Christ's return is expressed in Paul's prayer in Phil. 1:9-10: "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment (insight); that you may approve the things that are excellent (the highest and best) that you may be sincere and WITHOUT OFFENSE till the day of Christ." In other words, don't take offense or stumble over anything God requires of you or anything that happens to you, that you may be prepared for the day of Christ's coming. Paul then gives examples from his own life. He mentions his own "bonds" for Christ, for he was in prison when he wrote his letter to the Philippians (see Phil.1:12-14), He did not stumble over the fact that God allowed him to be put in prison, but even recognized that his imprisonment was turning out to the advantage and furtherance of the gospel (1:12). He then explains how in vs. 13-14, and I will quote from the Phillips translation: "For, first of all, my imprisonment means a personal witness for Christ before the Palace guards, not to mention others who come and go. Then it means that most our brothers, somehow taking fresh heart in the Lord from the very fact that I am a prisoner for Christ's sake, have shown far more courage in boldly proclaiming the word of God."

A Right Attitude

Paul goes on to comment on those who disliked him personally, and how they were actually preaching Christ out of envy (jealousy), strife (a partisan spirit) and contention, in order to annoy Paul and add further affliction to his imprisonment (Phil. 1:15-18). But Paul's reaction to such calculated harassment of himself was to simply rejoice that Christ was being preached, even though done in pretense and with a wrong motive. He also realized that the things happening to him were making a contribution to his own spiritual development as he states in 1:19: "Yes, and I shall go on being very happy, for I know that what is happening will be for the GOOD of my own SOUL, thanks to your prayers and the RESOURCES of the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (Phillips Translation). Thus he manifested a right response to the circumstances, to others, and TO GOD, who, Paul says, "is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless, before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy" (Jude 24). Many illustrations could be given from the Bible of those whose response was right in the midst of a difficult trial, but no doubt the classic example is that of Joseph, who endured cruelty and betrayal at the hands of his brother, imprisonment at the hands of Potaphar, but who by the providential working and grace of God was delivered and elevated to a position where he could declare unto his brothers in later years: "God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance, you meant evil against me; but GOD MEANT IT FOR GOOD" (Gen. 45:7, 50:20). The potential bitter was turned to SWEET.

When things don't go our way

How often we are prone to think we know better than God. How often we QUESTION His wisdom and goodness just because things are not working out the way we thought they should. Surely God has made some mistake! Surely He doesn't care! If only He would hear my prayer to change this and that to suit what I think it should be! And deep wounds begin to develop because we take offense at the way things are going in our lives. John the Baptist had pointed Israel to the Messiah. He had preached to multitudes, and had turned the hearts of many back to God. But opposition developed from certain quarters which landed him in prison. Nursing his "wounds", he sent messengers to Jesus to ask. "Are you the coming one, or do we look for another?" John could not reconcile the fact of Jesus being the Messiah and the fact that he was in prison. After

all, the Messiah was to vanquish the enemy and liberate Israel unto her destined glory. So he began to QUESTION the credentials of the very one he himself had proclaimed to be the Messiah! How like ourselves when we are in a hard place, when something which we did not reckon on and which upsets our plans and our "scheme of things" comes upon us, we send questions to the Lord. Jesus sent messengers back to John to declare His Messianic credentials, the miracles which He was performing, and then added these words for John to ponder: "And BLESSED is he, who is NOT OFFENDED BECAUSE OF ME" (see Mt. 11:2-6). How careful we need to be, that we stumble not, as John did in his time of trial, when things didn't go as he expected them to.

Persecutions

A natural human trait is the desire to be well liked by everyone. But nothing is more clear in the scriptures than that a true Christian life is going to be confronted by opposition in one form or another. Yet, so many Christians who are not deep-rooted in Christ, begin to STUMBLE when they realize that their Christian convictions are getting them into trouble with someone, sometimes even those closest to them, such as friends and relatives. The "hurt" they receive can cause them to "back off" and compromise in some way, or else "fall away" from the faith. Jesus pointed this out in the parable of the sower in Mt. l3:20-21, "But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word, and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles." Do we not sometimes stumble over rocks or stones? In this parable of the sower, the different kinds of soil represent different HEART conditions, for the seed of the word is sown in the heart. Stones in the ground (heart) represent LATENT CONDITIONS in the heart which are going to "surface" under conditions of tribulation (pressure, affliction) or persecution because of one's stand for Christ, thus providing potential "occasions of stumbling" for the person with such a "heart condition".

Satan Wars

Every "step" we take for Christ is going to be contested one way or another. He will try to come at us from every angle possible. He knows the latent conditions of the heart (stones of stumbling) that lurk within. Therefore he seeks to bring pressure on such areas through various means, involving many different circumstances and people, to cause latent fears, unbelief, pride, worldly lust, etc., to surface, causing one to stumble, get hurt, and thereby producing areas of "infection" where he can work to poison. Thus through the "flesh" of the world and people, Satan wars against us to arouse "the flesh" (carnality) within us and then use it against us. We see a type of this in the story of Israel after they came out of the land of Egypt. The people camped at Rephidim where the Lord instructed Moses to smite the rock with the rod to provide water for the people. This is a type of Christ (our Rock-see 1 Cor. 10:4) being smitten (crucified) for us to provide "living waters" (spiritual blessings and powers-see John 4:14, 7:37-39). Immediately after the "refreshing" came, we read that "then came Amalek, and fought with Israel in Rephidim" (Ex, 17:8). The word Amalek means "warlike", and the Amalekites are a type of the "flesh" (carnal nature) which "wars" against the Spirit-born nature within each Christian (see Gal. 5:l5-25). As in this pattern, whenever we receive further "refreshing from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19), and begin to walk in new realms in Christ, the enemy seeks to "contest", and puts on the "pressure" to see if he can defeat us through causing "stones of stumbling" to surface within our hearts.

Jesus Informs and Provides

We have already pointed out that so often we stumble because of lack of light (understanding). We are "thrown" into confusion because we do not know why certain things

are allowed to come against us, and we do not know how to appropriate the answer and provision Christ has made available for us. It is the Lord's purpose to allow the enemy to contest, and to provide occasions for "stones of stumbling" to surface that THEY MIGHT BE DEALT WITH by His grace and power, so that we WILL NOT stumble. Jesus wanted His disciples to know what they would face from the enemy (working through people and circumstances), and also to know HIS PROVISION for them. Thus before He went to the cross, He spoke to them in detail as recorded to them in John, chapters 14-16, beginning with the words "Let not your HEART be troubled (by tribulations, pressures, persecutions, etc.)"; then He prayed for them in chap.17, that the Father would KEEP them through His Name (power) as He had kept them while on earth (John 17:9-15). His prayer was NOT that they (and we)should be taken OUT of the world (to escape those experiences which are meant to test and perfect us, for He warned these things would come upon His own repeatedly), but that they should be KEPT from the evil devices of the enemy which would cause one to stumble, get hurt, and then fester in resentment, bitterness, hate, etc. Remember, IT IS NOT THE THINGS THAT HAPPEN TO US THAT CAUSE US TO STUMBLE (regardless of through whom they come) BUT OUR REACTION to those things. And Christ has provided the MEANS, through His grace, love, and the power of the Holy Spirit, to learn to RESPOND to everything and everyone in the right way.

Meditate much

Every Christian should read and meditate much on chapters 14-17 of John, for Jesus specifically said, "These things I have spoken to you, that you should NOT BE MADE TO STUMBLE" (John 16:1). What things? Primarily, that they should not be made to fall over the stumbling-block of persecution, and the refusal of people to hear their message, but also ALL of the PREPARATORY instructions He was giving, and the wonderful CONSOLATION promised in the IDENTIFICATION of the disciples with Himself and the witness of the Holy Spirit. Yet how little the disciples were able to comprehend at that time what He was trying to get them to see, but He realized that His words would bring understanding later, following His glorification when the Holy Spirit would be given to them as the "Spirit of truth" (John 14:17-20).

Stumbling in the Night

Because the disciples were not ready to understand when Jesus spoke His final message to them, and were yet so prone to stumble, He said plainly to them, "ALL of you will be made to stumble (caused to take offense) because of me THIS NIGHT" (Mt. 26:31). Offended? "Surely not me" thought Peter when he heard these words, presumptively turning to the Lord and exclaiming, "Even if all are made to stumble because of you, I will NEVER be made to stumble!" How little Peter knew of the "stones of stumbling "within his own heart, and how little we know also of such within our own hearts, UNTIL we find ourselves in those testing circumstances which cause them to surface. Jesus' response to Peter was, "Assuredly, I say to you that THIS NIGHT, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times" (Mt. 26:34), Jesus' emphasis on the NIGHT is significant, for it symbolically portrays the truth already mentioned that "stumbling" comes through lack of light or understanding of God's truth and the ways of His dealings with us, but if truth we receive and LIVE (responding to it's illumination of our pathway), then we are walking in the DAY, and we will not stumble (***John 11:1-10***).

Questioning God's goodness

One of the greatest danger areas of stumbling in our lives is the questioning (or even disbelieving) of the goodness of God. Every one of us can point to things in our own lives, or the lives of others, which seem to tell us that a "good God" would not allow such things to happen. This is because we look at things from such a different perspective than God does. We see the

limitation and pressure of the present moment; God sees from the over all perspective of His eternal purpose. Paul reminds us that ALL things work together for GOOD to those that love God and are CALLED according to HIS PURPOSE (Rom. 8:28). But what IS His purpose? It is declared in Rom. 8:29: "For whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be CONFORMED to the IMAGE of His SON, that He (Christ) might be the FIRSTBORN among MANY BRETHREN." God cannot push any magic buttons and make us like Christ, it is His work IN us (Phil. 1:6), but that work can be done in us only through the CRUCIBLE of TIME and EXPERIENCE. A "crucible" is a vessel or container which is used for melting metals; it becomes the "environment" in which the metals are refined so that the impurities and dross can be removed. So does God choose the "environment" or "crucible" of our life's experiences during the time of our sojourn here on earth as the means of developing within us the qualities that will perfect us into Christ's image and likeness, removing the "dross" of our carnality, that we might come forth as "pure gold" (Job 23:10, 1Pet.1:7, Rev.3:18).

More Than Conquerors

I do not mean that our life here on earth is to be one of "wale and woe", FAR FROM IT! Jesus came that we might have "life abundant" (John 10:10), providing for us His joy, peace, blessings, etc. (John 15:11, 16:33, Eph. 1:3, etc.). For the Christian, HEAVEN begins NOW. But we have to learn to accept the "bitter" with the "sweet" (Rev. 10:9-10), realizing that ALL of life's experiences are a manifestation of God's love arid ultimate good purpose for us. The primary reason why what seems "bitter" to us REMAINS that way and affects us adversely, is not the experience or circumstance itself, but OUR WRONG REACTION to it. This is what causes the stumbling and hurt. When God delivered Israel out of Egypt and led them into the wilderness, the people were continually complaining and grumbling because of God's dealings with them, and that generation NEVER entered the promised land, but simply wandered around and around getting nowhere. Until you let God "open your eyes" to see from His perspective, and teach you how to respond as He wants you to in every situation, you will likely find yourself "cursing your lot" and complaining about this and that much of the time, and feeling that so many things are "against you", letting the enemy cause you to stumble, and poisoning your soul. This is GROSS ERROR. NOTHING is ever "against" you. EVERYTHING that happens is an OPPORTUNITY to grow, to overcome, and to progress in God's plan. Paul declares, "If God is FOR us, who can be AGAINST us?" Read Rom. 8:31-39 carefully, and note that Paul lists all kinds of things that would seem to be against us, but he says that "in all these things we are MORE THAN CONQUERORS through him who loved us", and then concludes that NOTHING can separate us from the love of God. Only WE in our foolishness can do that. The only thing "against" anyone is their wrong attitude and response to the things that happen, to other people, or to God.

Trusting God's Goodness

Love is based on mutual confidence. You cannot fully love someone you do not fully TRUST. Trust comes through KNOWING. The more we know God in a personal way, the more we trust Him. Adam and Eve in the garden had not come to know God sufficiently to TRUST Him COMPLETELY. So when Satan put the "bait" before them of questioning God's goodness, they fell for it. Satan suggested that God wasn't really as good as they thought Him to be, because He was trying to keep them from something that would make them wiser and better than they were (Gen.3:4-6). In other words, there was really no good reason why they should not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, for God was just being arbitrary in His command to them. Once we begin to come into a more mature perspective and begin to experience the love of God in a greater measure, we know that God never acts in any ARBITRARY manner. The word "arbitrary" means to be guided by WILL alone, to be high-handed, dictatorial, absolute, exercising power and authority simply because one has it, and not for any good reason. But God HAS a good

reason for everything. He does and commands, even though we in our limited perspective do not understand why. He acts out of pure LOVE. He has the ultimate welfare, blessing, and happiness of His children in mind. When we come to the place where we can fully trust the Lord's goodness and respond to His love, then we can also begin to respond to His will in everything (even the seemingly bad things), and with a response that is right and pleasing to Him, we will not "take offense" or stumble in anything.

Fear

So many Christians are afraid to fully respond to God. They do not fully trust His goodness. This is illustrated by the words of the servant in the parable of the pounds as recorded in Lk.19:21: "For I feared you, because you are a harsh man, You collect what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow." This servant believed His Master was arbitrary in his actions and dealings with His servants, and thus he kept the pound given him "laid up in a handkerchief" (19.20), and did not make it his own or add to it, because he did not utilize it, he lost it. The words of Lk.19:22 can only be understood when we realize that the servant was being judged on the basis of the words of his own mouth, which reflected the concepts he had "laid up" in his handkerchief (head), in other words, we REAP the consequences of what we believe and confess (whether right or wrong). We will respond to God as we BELIEVE He is, so it is very important that we come to the right UNDERSTANDING.

God Sows; then Reaps

It would be foolish for a farmer to go out and scold and berate his land because it would not bring forth a crop, but only weeds, while he himself had NOT sown any seed. Neither is God so foolish as to demand fruit where He has not sown. Our Lord is NOT a "harsh" person as portrayed by the man in Lk, 19:21, He "sows" His very own DIVINE LIFE SEED within us (1 Pet.1:23, 2 Pet.1:4), which contains the full potential of all that HE IS. And only on the basis of His divine life resident within us, watered by His word and Spirit, nurtured by the "sunshine" of His love, and care fully cultivated through His dealings in experience and time, does He expect to "reap" a harvest of Christ-like fruit in us (Gal, 5:22-23). But if we hold wrong concepts of our gracious Lord, stumbling because of fear, unbelief, pride, disobedience, offenses, etc., then what He has sown in us will remain largely unproductive and stunted in growth, and WE will be the LOSERS, as the Lord's purpose for us hindered and delayed.

Goodness then Glory

When Moses was in the mount with God, he said: "Please, show me Your glory" God's response was: I will make all my goodness pass before you" (Ex. 33:l8-l9). We read in the book of Ephesians, of both the "riches of His grace" (1:7,2:7), and the "riches of His glory" (1:18, 3:16). The riches of His glory speaks of all His provision for us, the realities, blessings, and powers of our inheritance in Him. The riches of His grace is the MEANS to bring us into that inheritance, even the manifestation of His favor or goodness to us, not because we deserve it but because of His love to us. Grace is God making Himself available to us through Jesus Christ, to do for us, in us, and through us what we cannot do ourselves. Through Christ He is making His goodness pass before us. Also, when we can fully believe in God's absolute goodness, then we will see that IN every experience of our lives, HE IS CAUSING HIS GOODNESS TO PASS BEFORE US, for in His love He will not allow anything to happen that is not necessary for His incredibly wonderful purpose for us. We will enter into and experience the riches of His glory only as we see His goodness and respond to His grace in everything that happens.

At God's disposal

When God told Moses that He would cause His goodness to pass before him, He also spoke of two more related matters as recorded in Ex, 33:19, First, He said, "I will proclaim the name of the Lord (Jehovah) before you." "Jehovah" was the covenant name revealed to Israel, the "I AM" who was EVER PRESENT WITH them to meet all of their NEEDS (see Ex. 3:14-16). Secondly, He said, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." Thus He declared not only His PROVISION but also His SOVEREIGNTY in the exercise of His goodness and mercy in meeting the needs of His people. This may sound like God is being arbitrary, but rather it is a declaration that HE KNOWS BEST in His sovereign wisdom and providence, as to just HOW and WHEN and UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES He will manifest His grace. He reserves to Himself the objects, the time, the manner, and the measure of His mercy and compassion, based NOT upon arbitrary will, but upon what HE DEEMS BEST for each one according to His dealings and His purpose for that one at a given time. So many STUMBLE over what they feel is "unfairness" on the part of God in meeting their needs. They can point to so many instances in their own experiences, or among those around them, where it seems that God has manifested His graciousness and mercy to some and withheld it from others. Regardless of how it looks from our perspective, we must have enough confidence in His goodness that we know whatever action He takes or withholds, it is for GOOD REASONS, and not arbitrary will. God was saying to Moses (and to us), "Learn to TRUST me in each situation, and DON'T JUDGE me from your limited perspective, for I know what I am doing, in harmony with my eternal design and purpose and in harmony with my infinite love."

Build an Altar

As an expression of their dedication and submission to God, as well as to offer sacrifices to Him, the ancient patriarchs and later the people of Israel, built altars of STONES, They were not to build their altars with bricks, symbolic of man-made things, but of whole uncut stones, just as they found them in their surroundings, without using any tool on them (Ex. 20:25, Deut. 27:5-6), stones which God in His creative power had placed there for their use. Can we not see a spiritual application in this? We have already pointed out that every experience that God allows to come our way can be a stumbling stone or a building stone. Should we not take the accumulative "stones" of our life's experiences and with them BUILD AN ALTAR unto the praise and glory of God? We should USE every experience as "divinely placed material" for building, I'm sure that many of the stones used in ancient times to build altars unto the Lord were very sharp and rough, but they were to be used just that way. Even so, many of our experiences are difficult to handle; we don't like them as they are and we can get hurt, but God means for us to use them to build with, without using the "tool" of our own strivings against the Lord, our complaints and murmurings which question His goodness, and without trying to "cut" and "fashion" a "graven image" out of our own imagination as to the way we want our life experiences (stones) to be shaped in our own stubbornness and self will.

Sacrifices

The altars of stones which God had the people build, were for sacrifices. As Christians we are to offer up "spiritual sacrifices" (1 Pet.2:5), even the sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise unto the Lord (Ps.107:22, Heb.13:15). Therefore as each "stone" of experience is added to our "altar," upon it should be offered our praises to God. Paul tells us that it is God's will for us to . . . "give thanks IN everything" (1Thess. 5:18). Going further in Eph. 5:19-20, he says that we are to sing and make melody in our hearts to the Lord, "giving thanks ALWAYS for ALL things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." This goes contrary to our natural reasoning and we think it foolish to give thanks for something that seems bad, difficult or unpleasant. But

when we see that ALL THINGS (uncut by tool) are the "stones" necessary to build the kind of life God desires in strength and maturity, then we can learn to "Rejoice in the Lord ALWAYS" and "Be anxious for nothing, but in EVERYTHING by prayer and supplication WITH THANKSGIVING let our requests be made known unto God" (Phil. 4:4-6). Then the "PEACE of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guide our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:7).

Neither take nor give offense

Let us now consider together some final admonitions concerning our relationship to one another, and possible stumbling-blocks. Jesus warned about "offenses" in Mt. 18:6-9, He makes it clear that we are to neither take offense (and stumble ourselves), nor give offense (an occasion of stumbling) to others, He said, "Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!" He further said that anyone who would "offend" a little child, being responsible for the stumbling of that little one, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. In other words, we are our brother's keeper (Gen. 4:9). We are responsible for our example before others. We must do all we can to keep ourselves from stumbling, lest through our "fall", someone else is caused to stumble. Wherefore, said Jesus, "if your hand or foot causes you to sin (offend), cut it off, and cast it from you, and if your eye causes you to sin (offend), pluck it out, and cast it from you." The language is symbolic, of course, but such vivid picture language was used to emphasize and dramatize the necessity of "cutting off" from our experience anything and everything that we are consciously aware of that could become an occasion of stumbling to us, or to others that we might influence. The "hand" speaks of our power to do or accomplish something, and the "foot" speaks of our Christian "walk" and example before the world. The "eye" is the "window of the soul" whereby we covet or lust after this or that. We need to discern and recognize potential occasions of stumbling and avoid them at all costs, for our sake and for the sake of others.

The law of love

The criterion for conduct which Paul sets before Christians is found in 1 Cor. 10:24, "Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being." He then proceeds to show in the verses following (25-31), that the conscience of the other person must be considered as well as one's own; not being in bondage to another's conscience, but acting IN LOVE for his own good. In every circumstance, the law of love demands that we consider how what we do may affect another's conscience, Paul reminds his readers in this regard that "knowledge puffs up, but love edifies (builds up)" (1 Cor. 8:1). He continues through the rest of the chapter to show that though each Christian has the right and liberty to act according to his enlightened understanding, not all Christians have the SAME KNOWLEDGE or enlightenment, and that our "liberty" to do certain things must not become a stumbling block to a brother (1 Cor. 8:9), for this would be a violation of the law of LOVE, which must always come FIRST in determining our actions. In every circumstance, my choice or conduct must not be determined by what I have a "right" to do, but by the love of my brother for whom Christ died (1 Cor. 8:11). A Christian does not demand his "rights", but has YIELDED his rights to the Lord and has chosen the path of the CROSS, which is the path of self-denial whenever that is necessary for his own spiritual welfare and that of others.

Forgiveness

Before there can be healing for the inner wounds of the soul, there must be the RELEASE of all hurts through FORGIVENESS. We read in Isa. 53:5 that Jesus was "bruised for our iniquities," He took all our hurts and the consequences upon Himself when He died on the cross, and

as a result He has RELEASED us through FORGIVENESS. Once we accept and receive the inner assurance of that forgiveness, He has the power to "set at liberty (and heal) them that are bruised" (Lk. 4:18). But there is a related factor which is a necessary part of this process. We must not only BE RELEASED through receiving God's forgiveness, but we must RELEASE OTHERS through granting them our forgiveness, ONLY when the TWO GO TOGETHER can there be inner HEALING for the soul. The scriptures make it clear that God CANNOT release us through forgiveness until we are also willing to release others through forgiveness (see Mt. 6:12,14-15, 18:21-35).

Forgiving and retaining sins

Jesus declared in John 20:23, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Whenever we refuse to release others through forgiveness, we are RETAINING their sins, and making it necessary for God to "retain" our sins, so that we do not receive forgiveness. And when we are not forgiven, we must CONTINUE to suffer the CONSEQUENCES of our sins. This is the unfortunate plight of many Christians, who "retain" the sins of others through unforgiveness. Many times another person will not turn to God and seek forgiveness because of bitterness toward YOU, if you have not released him through your forgiveness. Thus your unforgiveness can affect another's relation to God as well as your own, James tells us to "Confess your trespasses (offenses toward) to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be HEALED" (James 5:16), It is the INNER healing of the "wounds" inflicted against one another that James has in mind. Confession precedes forgiveness, and forgiveness is necessary for healing. And our confession must be to the one we have wounded as well as to God, thereby enabling RELEASE to come.

Offended in Christ?

I trust by now that you have been able to see that there are many ways that we can actually be offended in Christ, "stumbling" over His TRUTH to us and His WAYS of DEALING with us in time and experience. When this happens, we are an "offense" to Him, even as Peter was when he refused to accept the truth concerning Jesus' suffering and Divine destiny at Jerusalem, and sought to resist the purpose of God (see Mt. 16:21-23). Jesus turned to Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." The New American Standard renders that last phrase: "for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." Thus whenever we get offended and stumble, or are an offense to others or to the Lord, it is because we have our minds set on the ways and interests of man instead of God, and are REACTING accordingly.

God's Healing Grace

Because of the fall of man, every person is born with a sin-nature which eventually manifests itself in self-will and disobedience, but in the actual developing experience of a person, it is not until the accumulative "wounds" of experience begin to fester and poison the soul, that there develops the "bondage of sin" through "bitterness". At an early age a child begins to manifest the innate tendency to self-will and disobedience, but that child is not yet in bondage to the poison of hate, envy, resentment, bitterness, greed, distrust, futility, defeat, depression etc. These develop out of the "wounds" of experience through "stumbling". People tend to REACT in given situations because of the "residue of poisonous sin" accumulated from hurtful experiences of the past. People also tend to try to reach out and COMPENSATE in some self seeking way. From these things there are deliverance and healing for the wounds in the soul. God does not Condemn us for stumbling and getting hurt, but He does warn us not to fail to RESPOND to HIS HEALING GRACE lest there be poisoning and bitterness set in. "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger,

clamor (quarreling), and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, even as God in Christ forgave you." ***Eph. 4:31-32***.

Gathering out

In Mt. 13:40-41, Jesus speaks of the end of this age when God's purpose will be consummated in a final harvest. At that time, He says that the angels will be sent forth to "gather out of his kingdom all things that OFFEND (cause to stumble), "and those who practice lawlessness." How wonderful that in His coming kingdom there will be no "stumbling stones". This is in harmony with Isa. 11:9 where the Lord speaks through the prophet saying, "They shall NOT HURT nor destroy in all my holy mountain (kingdom), for the earth shall be FULL of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." But NOW, God allows the occasions of stumbling to remain, even as Jesus said: "for offences must come" (Mt. 18:7). WHY? NOT that God deliberately wants us to stumble, but in His infinite WISDOM, He sees such occasions as necessary for our TESTING and PERFECTING. But wait, we who have accepted Christ are His Kingdom NOW, and IF we are willing to LEARN of Him, and SUBMIT to His purposes, RESPONDING as He desires in every situation, He can and will "GATHER OUT" of US (our hearts) ALL that would cause us to stumble, and then NOTHING will HURT or DESTROY in the "holy mountain" of our inner heart and life. HOW WONDERFUL! And how much in harmony with Ps. 119:165: "Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing shall offend them."

Finally

When Jesus came into His own country, the people were astonished at the wisdom and works they saw. But when they found out that this man of God was only the "carpenter of Nazareth", one of their own hometown kinfolk, they could not imagine that God could work through him in such a way, and it says that they "were offended at him" (Mt. 13:57). Thus truth was rejected and Jesus "did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief" (Mt. 13:58). How often it is true in our lives, that we are not open to receive truth, and the mighty works of God are not manifested to us, because we are offended at God's way of doing things, offended at the vessels He uses, or offended because it does not fit the pattern of preconceived ideas of what He should do and how He should work. How we need to get our minds renewed (Eph. 4:23; Rom.12:2), and learn HIS WAYS, so that we stumble not through our carnal and distorted thinking. (See Isa 55:8-9). Amen!

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